

The Fruit of the Spirit: Faithfulness: 10th July, 2016.

Proverbs 20:6 *"Many a man claims to have unfailing love; but a faithful man who can find?"*

When the Bible speaks about faithfulness, it's describing a person who says what they mean and does what they say. It's a combination, therefore of truth and integrity. And when we see it in others it is a powerful and glorious thing.

Sadly however, we live in a world where faithfulness is a bit of a rarity. We may demand it from our politicians and rely on it from our spouses, but time and time again we are let down. Think of the political scandals like, the number of election promises that are forgotten or the way statistics are misused to make a point; time and time again we see our leaders say one thing but do another.

But of course it's not just in our politicians and leaders. A survey in 2015 said that 36% of adults in the UK were open to having an extra-marital affair. That's both stunning and sad, but it's backed up by the fact that 40% of marriages end in divorce; and a huge proportion of those breakdowns comes from a lack of faithfulness to the promises both parties made at their wedding.

And it seems that this level of faithlessness is now also endemic in the business world. Last year Volkswagen hit the headlines after doctoring their figures on fuel economy and they're not alone. Not so long ago the sports shoe company New Balance was given a heavy fine for the false claim that wearing their shoes burnt off more calories than wearing other trainers.

But even they didn't go as far as the Kashi food company. When they were tested Kashi Company's "All Natural" products were chock full of "almost entirely synthetic and unnaturally processed ingredients." In fact, ingredients that are considered prescription drugs and federally-classified hazardous substances were found to be the primary ingredients in the so called "natural" foods.

In our leaders, in the business world and in our own lives faithfulness seems to be in short supply. No wonder there is a growing lack of trust in society. But when we come to the Bible we discover that God is faithful, so is faithful that not one of his promises ever fails. In fact God is so faithful that when he speaks what he says comes to pass. We see that in creation don't we. God said 'let there be light' and there was light. But right throughout the Scriptures we find that God is totally and utterly faithful. So let's start there.

1: God's Faithfulness

Over the next 8 weeks or so the two candidates to be the next leader of the Conservative party and Prime Minister will be making some huge claims about themselves and their visions for the future. No doubt they will also look back and point to things they have done in the past as evidence that they will be faithful in the office they hope to hold. At the same time their opponent's supporters will be looking for times when they have said one thing and done another or when they haven't been entirely truthful. We've seen some of that already.

But right at the heart of the character of God is his faithfulness. Listen to the way God describes himself when he appears to Moses on the mountain in Exodus 34: As the LORD passed in front of Moses, he proclaimed his name: *"The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness."* Right there amongst God's compassion and grace and mercy and patience is God's faithfulness. The God of the Bible always says what he means – and that is always the truth - and then he does what he says.

So think for a moment how the Lord has kept his promises to Abraham, to Jacob, to Moses, to King David and how all the promises of God about a deliverer were fulfilled in Jesus. Abraham had a son in his old age; Jacob's family went down to Egypt and then 400+ years later they were rescued and brought out into the Promised Land; remember how

the Lord fed and watered the people through the wilderness for 40 years; remember the promise God gave to King David that he would have one of his descendants on the throne forever and ever; and then think how many promises came true in Jesus. Hundreds of Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled in Christ from the place of his birth to the manner of his death. God has proved time and time again that he is faithful to his word. And that is great news for us because since God has always kept his promises in the past, we can have complete confidence that he will keep his promises to us.

The Lord promises to forgive us our sins when we truly repent, 1 John 1:9; he promises that we will not be tempted beyond that which we can bear, 1 Corinthians 10:13; he promises that one day we will be made perfect like Jesus, 1 Thessalonians 5:23 and 24, and he promises eternal life to all who believe, John 3:16.

Now imagine for a moment that God was not faithful. Imagine that what we read in the Bible wasn't true but had been put together by an advertising company with rather loose morals. It would be a disaster, wouldn't it? We couldn't have any confidence in what the Bible says about God? We couldn't trust his character; we wouldn't know if his commands were right; we wouldn't know if Jesus really did die on the cross in our place and rise again from the dead. Without the faithfulness of God's words about himself and all he has done we would be completely in the dark!

And imagine if God wasn't faithful to his promises to us. Imagine if when God said that he would always be with us by his Spirit that he really meant he'd be with us always unless there was a good football match or a great movie on the TV. Imagine for a moment that when God promised to forgive all who repented he really meant those who caught him on a good day or those who could afford to make a healthy donation to the church. Or imagine if God's promise of eternal life all who believe in Jesus only worked if you died on Wednesday. If God was not faithful to his word we would be utterly lost, wouldn't we: Utterly lost, totally confused, and without hope in this broken, painful and faithless world.

But praise God he is faithful! He only speaks the truth, and his promises always come to pass. He says what he means and he does what he says; every time, without fail, however costly. That means that our faith in the God of the Bible is never misplaced and we can take him at his word and rely on him to do just as he has promised.

And if God is faithful, then of course we should be faithful too. That's why faithfulness is one of the fruit of the Spirit because the Holy Spirit works in us to change our character so we conform more and more to the likeness of Jesus. So just as God is faithful, if we are Christians, then we need to be faithful. And that means being faithful in our dealings with one another and faithful in our dealings with the Lord. We'll look at each of those two things in turn.

2: Being faithful in our dealings with one another.

The first thing this implies is that we need to be honest and truthful in the things we say. "*You shall not lie*" is commandment number 9, and the need for always telling the truth is reinforced by the fact that in the list of those who do not get to heaven in Revelation 21, liars get onto the list.

So how truthful are you? Are you someone who is content with a little white lie? Are you someone who doesn't worry about bending the truth a little or hiding the whole truth because you don't have the courage or the tact to speak the truth with kindness and grace?

There is nothing in the Bible which says that white lies are okay or that there is level of seriousness where you have to tell the truth but below that it really doesn't matter. No, God is utterly faithful in all he says: he speaks the truth and so should we. Even when it's costly.

So when you're showing a prospective buyer around your house and they ask about the neighbours or the noise from the road, what are you going to say? Well, if you are a Christian, then you need to tell the truth- even if it costs you the sale.

Or if you are at work and something gets missed and you know it's your fault. Do you keep quiet and hide the truth, hoping that someone else will get the blame or do you speak up? If you are a Christian you need to tell the truth, even if it costs you your career. God's faithfulness means he is always truthful; and we should be too.

Secondly, we need to be utterly dependable. If we are Christians then our word should be our bond and just as the Lord is true to his promises, then we need to be true to ours.

This of course means that we need to be careful about what we say and what we commit ourselves to. You see having given our word we shouldn't then say I'll keep that commitment as long as it's convenient, or as long as I don't get a better offer, or as long as it doesn't prove too costly. If, by the work of the Holy Spirit in us, we are growing in faithfulness then as far as it depends on us our word needs to be our bond.

So for example, if you've agreed to babysit for someone and then are invited to a party, you need to keep your original commitment, or at least make sure you find a suitable and agreeable substitute.

If you've agreed a sale price on your car or your house and then you get a better offer, what do you do? Well if you want to be faithful as God is faithful then you need to stick with your word and keep to the original deal.

And of course it's true for marriage as well. Sometimes after being married for a number of years it's easy to take your spouse for granted. You stop making the effort to love and cherish each other, and then a new colleague or neighbour comes along and shows a lot of interest in you and you feel a spark of excitement you haven't felt for some time. What should you do? Well you've given your word already. You made solemn vows to love your spouse through sickness and health; forsaking all others until death do you part. Faithfulness here means keeping your vows. God is faithful, and he expects his children to be faithful also.

Here's the 3rd aspect of our dealings with one another: Unswerving loyalty.

There are some well-publicised instances of disloyalty around at the moment aren't there! But well before Michael Gove did the evil deed on Boris stabbing people in the back has been, sadly, a common occurrence. But if we are to grow in faithfulness towards one another, then that means developing an unswerving loyalty to our friends. The type of friendship I'm thinking about here is a friendship that lasts through thick and thin; when they are popular, contented, happy and generous; and when their lives fall apart and they make stupid mistakes and cause hurt to others around them.

You see God is amazingly loyal. There are many times in the Bible when God's people as a whole or individuals he has called let him run after other gods or ignore his commands. But what we find is that God's love for his people never fails and his mercies never come to an end.

Of course God doesn't show blind loyalty. He never tells his disobedient people that what they're doing is okay; he doesn't brush their sins under the carpet. Through his prophets and through Jesus, God has some hard and blunt words to say to them but there is always a welcome waiting for the repentant sinner. God's love for us never runs out the matter what we do.

And we need to show that kind of unswerving loyalty to our friends too. I wonder if you do that, or if there are friends you haven't spoken to since their marriage broke up or they ended up in prison or went bankrupt? Are you an unswervingly loyal friend?

Telling the truth; keeping our word and showing unswerving loyalty: that's how we show faithfulness to one another. But as well as being faithful in our dealings with one another, we need, thirdly to be...

3: Faithful in our dealings with God.

Just last week we had a confirmation service and this morning over in Graveley we have a baptism service, rather like the one that many of you will have gone through at some point in your lives. And in both of those services some weighty declarations and promises are made that are even more serious than the promises made at a wedding. At a wedding we make promises to another person, and as we've seen that's serious enough. God expects us to keep our word even when it's hard and even when it's costly. But at a baptism or confirmation people make promises and declarations to God.

Amongst other things candidates, parents, godparents will say that they understand and believe the truth about God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit taught by the Bible and written in the creeds; that they have turned from their sin and turned to Christ; that they had taken Jesus as their Lord and their saviour and have rejected the Devil and all his works. They will promise, if they are parents or godparents, to bring up their children within the family of the church, teaching them about Jesus at home, and living a life of discipleship themselves so that as their children grow up they can see what it looks like to follow Christ. These are huge promises and massive commitments, and many of you have made them yourselves, but so often those making these promises fail to see them through.

How can this be? How can we take our own words and promises so lightly? How dare we make promises and commitments to God and not make the effort to see them through?

You see when we become a Christian Jesus doesn't just become our saviour he becomes our Lord, our Captain, our King; and we need to submit to his rightful Lord over our lives. We don't declare that Jesus Christ is now our adviser or our consultant! We proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord! Growing in faithfulness means living up to the promises we have made when we became a Christian.

It also means fulfilling our calling, whatever that might be. If you've been called to preach the gospel or to be an evangelist or to lead a home group then do it fearlessly, faithfully, wholeheartedly preaching the whole counsel of God. If you've been called to show generosity or hospitality, do it humbly and graciously, not looking for thanks. If you've been called to serve in administration then do it diligently. Whatever your talents are, we have a responsibility to use them for the good of those around us and for the glory of God.

And that applies to our working lives as well. Your calling, right now, is to work for the glory of God in your workplace. That's where God has placed you; so do it well. Do it to the best of your ability. Do it so God gets the glory. We need to be faithful in our dealings with God.

Now my time is almost up and it may be that you are feeling rather wretched right now because you know you have made promises to people in the past and have failed to keep them. Or perhaps you've made promises to God in the past and you haven't lived up to them. Or perhaps even this week you've told lies or covered up the truth just for an easy life. Or perhaps you're just rather daunted by the whole prospect of trying to be faithful in a world where faithlessness is so common.

If any of those things are true, here are three things to encourage you to be faithful.

1: Faithfulness brings a reward.

In our passage from Matthew chapter 25 the faithful servant is rewarded by his master. Did you notice that? And it's the same for us. The Bible tells us repeatedly that if we are faithful to God and hold on to the gospel then there is in store for us a reward beyond imagination. So keep going, put your shoulder to the wheel and keep your eyes on the glory to come because faithfulness brings a reward.

2: Faithfulness is a fruit of the Spirit.

We have said numerous times through this series that growing in the fruit of the Spirit is a work of the Spirit who changes us to be more like Jesus. That is true here also. You are not on your own. You do not have to do this all through willpower. Yes it will be hard, there will be a cost and there will be temptations along the way, but if you keep your eyes on Jesus and stay faithful in prayer and rooted in the scriptures then with the Spirit's help you will grow in faithfulness.

3: Although we fail God is always faithful.

We started by thinking about God's faithfulness and we must never forget that because this is where our hope and comfort is found. You see, when we fail and when we fall, we have a God who is *'faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'* 1 John 1: 9.

When life feels like it is falling apart our God is a *'rock, whose works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.'* Deuteronomy 32:4.

And when we feel we cannot go on we have a saviour who was faithful and true right to the end; one who for the glory set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame and who is now sat at the right hand of God in glory. And because Jesus was faithful to the end failures are covered by Jesus' faithfulness.

So let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfect of our faith, and with the help of the Holy Spirit at work in us, may we grow in faithfulness to the blessing of our families and relationships and to the glory of God. Amen.